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Forging Family Ties

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Forging Family Ties

Writing Process

The assignment for this essay was to develop an argument related to gender in the United States and to use your own original research in addition to other sources. First, I thought about prominent issues in the United States and decided to focus on prejudice against homosexual couples who were attempting to adopt children. After doing some initial research, I decided that homosexual adoption rights need to be expanded on in the United States. I did more research on databases and in Roesch Library to find sources that would both support my side of the issue, but also some sources that would provide me with a counterargument. For my original research, I decided to conduct a survey in order to gain insight into other opinions on homosexual adoption rights. This survey was given out on the floor of my residence hall, at my mom's work, and was posted online to diversify results. There were two rough drafts of this essay, both of which were read to a workshopping group and edited. The second draft was also reviewed by my professor, Dr. Laura Vorachek, and I made changes based on her comments.

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Forging Family Ties

After months of planning, John and Alex were ready to take the next step. After being in a committed relationship for nearly ten years, they decided the time was right. Their relationship had had its challenges, especially in the very beginning when they first came out. But they had learned to put all of that behind them and to ignore the judgment and disapproval of strangers. Now, they had a loving relationship, a big house, and a stable income large enough to live quite comfortably. There was only one thing missing. What the two men wanted more than anything was to have a family of their own. Unable to have their own children, they turned to adoption. They chose to find a child in the foster system because of the large amount of children waiting for families. Meanwhile, a young girl named Amelia longingly waited to find her permanent home. Instead, she bounced from family to family, a very stressful and confusing life for such a young child. If she didn't find a home soon, she would be placed in a group home, where she would not receive the care and attention that she deserved. Amelia was only one of many children dreaming to find a stable living situation. She would have found the perfect home with John and Alex; however, the couple had not anticipated that their application to become foster parents would be turned down. Despite the fact that they met the criteria to foster and were completely capable and willing to raise a child, there was just one problem—John and Alex were gay. Simply because of their sexuality, they were told they were unfit to parent, and Amelia never got the opportunity to become part of their family.

Despite the progress that America has been making regarding homosexual rights even in the past decade, gay and lesbian couples like the hypothetical John and Alex introduced above still face difficulties when trying to adopt. Unless same-sex adoption rights are expanded on, this will continue to be an issue that negatively affects both children and parents. These rights should be expanded on because they benefit both children and parents, and there are no negative effects of homosexual parenting that should prevent the expansion of these rights.

Today, there are no bans on individual homosexual adoption, although that was not the case just a few years ago. Legally, homosexual individuals are permitted to adopt, but cannot always share custody of the child with their partner. For example, second-parent adoption is a procedure in which the same-sex partner adopts the child of the other partner in such a way that both partners share equal rights and responsibilities while both being legally recognized as the child's parents. This procedure, however, is only permitted in nine states (Federle 79). There are other options, such as joint adoption, which in many states requires a couple to be married, preventing homosexual couples in states with gay marriage bans from sharing custody of the child. Joint custody agreements are also an option, but do not make the same-sex partner a legal parent, and only allow some legal authority to the non-parent. Katherine Hunt Federle, a professor of law at the Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, explains the disadvantages of joint custody agreements:

The child does not have the protection of a second parent, nor enjoy all of the benefits available to other children with two parents. For example, if the non-parent dies, the child will not automatically inherit any of her assets unless she has a will; the child is not eligible for Social Security benefits from the non-parent; and a custody decree is easily subject to modification. (84)

Not only do joint custody agreements prevent the non-parent from having the same legal authority as a parent, but the child also loses some of the benefits of having a second parent.

In addition to a lack of adoption rights, gay and lesbian couples also face discrimination when petitioning to adopt. Judges aim to place children in homes where they will receive the best quality of life, and prejudice against same-sex couples can influence the decision, not only making it more difficult for homosexual couples to adopt, but also making it more difficult for children in foster care to find permanent homes. This prejudice may also be preventing courts from expanding on homosexual adoption rights.

I surveyed 59 people between the ages of 14 and 68 and of varying religions, such as Christianity and Hinduism, about their opinions on homosexual adoption. This survey was given out on the floor of my residence hall at the University of Dayton and was also posted online in order to diversify the results. I received a majority of positive responses toward same-sex adoption, with 57 of those surveyed believing that homosexual adoption should be allowed, while only 2 disagreed. The two who disagreed believed that homosexual adoption was wrong for multiple reasons: homosexuality is a sin, homosexual parenting will lead to gender or sexuality confusion, the child will face bullying on account of their parents' sexuality, the child will face psychological problems, and that a child needs both a mother and a father. Multiple studies have shown that many of these fears have no truth behind them, and that the differences between homosexual and heterosexual parenting are very slight.

In the case of whether or not homosexuality is a sin, it is impossible to come to a consensus. People belong to a wide variety of different faiths, and beliefs differ even within religions. One Catholic who responded to my survey said, "Although same sex adoption is a difficult topic, the church teaches that marriage is only to be between a man and a woman, thus,

only these families are acceptable in the eyes of the church.” Another Catholic, on the other hand, supported homosexual adoption and claimed, “Even though it is against my faith, I feel like people should be able to express their true self.” Both agree that it is against their faith, but feel differently about whether or not that means homosexual adoption should be allowed. Because the United States has a separation of church and state, which prevents laws from being created solely based on religion, the idea of “sin” cannot be taken into account when considering the legality of gay and lesbian adoption. Instead, we must focus on facts, such as whether or not homosexual parenting has detrimental effects on children.

The second concern that was raised on my survey is that children raised by same-sex couples will face gender confusion and may even become homosexual themselves. Studies comparing adolescents raised by homosexual parents and those raised by heterosexual parents show that this is not the case. In fact, in one such study, comparing children raised by lesbian mothers and children raised by heterosexual single mothers, only one child was of a homosexual orientation, and that child was from the heterosexual family group (Black 99). In a similar study of only gay families, only one of twenty-one children was homosexual, similar to the percentage of homosexuality found in the general population (Black 99). This data suggests that the sexuality of a child’s parents does not have an effect on the child’s own sexuality.

Children of homosexual parents do, however, tend to adhere less rigidly to gender roles than children of heterosexual parents. Boys raised by heterosexual parents tend to demonstrate more aggression than boys raised by lesbian parents, though both groups preferred stereotypically masculine jobs (Black 98). On the other hand, girls raised by lesbian parents tended to show interest in a wider range of both feminine and gender-neutral activities than those raised by heterosexual parents (Black 98). An interest in gender-neutral activities does not imply

gender confusion, and in fact provides the children with a wider range of opportunities later in life because they do not strictly confine themselves to gender-typed roles. To further prove that homosexual parents do not incite gender confusion in their children, a study done in 1986 asked children of both homosexual and heterosexual parents what gender they would choose if they could be born again, and a majority of the children chose their biological sex, regardless of whether their parents were heterosexual or not (Black 97). Both homosexual and heterosexual parents have a low percentage of children who would prefer to be the opposite gender, and homosexual parents are no more likely than heterosexual parents to raise a child with a homosexual orientation.

Numerous studies have also investigated the social and psychological development of children raised by same-sex parents. According to Abbie E. Goldberg, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Clark University, “Concerns that children raised by lesbian and gay parents will experience peer ostracism related to their parents’ sexual orientation have been raised by judges and used as a rationale for denying custody to lesbian and gay parents” (135). Some people worry that children raised by homosexual parents will face difficulties socializing due to criticism by peers and, as a result, develop psychological issues. While it is true that children can be teased on account of their parents’ sexuality, children from homosexual families report no more incidents of teasing than children from heterosexual families (Goldberg 135). While the content of the teasing differs, children with lesbian or gay parents are statistically no more likely to face bullying. Their relationships with peers likewise do not seem to be affected by the sexual orientation of their parents. According to studies, 80 percent of girls raised by lesbian mothers claimed to be popular among their peers, while only 75 percent of girls from heterosexual parents reported the same (Black 89). According to the American Civil Liberties

Union, children in foster care face bullying due to their lack of parents, which makes them feel unwanted (44). Depriving these children of a loving, stable family also leaves them without a support system. So, while the sexuality of a parent does not seem to have any effect on the social development of a child or adversely affect relationships between peers, the absence of parents does.

Tied into concerns about social skills are worries about the psychological adjustment of children raised by homosexual parents. Because some opposers of gay and lesbian parenting assume that the children will be victimized by their peers, these children were also expected to develop low self-esteem and mental health issues. Researchers have studied multiple age groups, ranging from childhood to adolescence and discovered this assumption was false. There tends to be no difference between the psychological health of children raised by homosexual parents and children raised by heterosexual parents. In fact, when looking at behavioral issues in children with lesbian mothers, researchers found that girls had fewer behavioral problems than expected, while the rest of the results did not differ from results from the overall population (Goldberg 139). Research has also evaluated independence and self-confidence, important parts of development in both children and their mothers. Such studies concluded that, though children of both groups developed independence at the same rate, lesbian mothers score higher in terms of self-confidence, dominance, and exhibition than heterosexual mothers, meaning that lesbian mothers are more likely to encourage independence in their children (Black 86-87). It is important for children to become independent so that they are able to make their own decisions without constantly deferring to a parent. In addition to suffering from no adverse psychological effects from homosexual parenting, some children may even benefit from growing up with same-sex parents. It is speculated that “such children could possibly approach their own sexuality with

greater acceptance, develop more empathy for others, and have a greater tolerance for alternative points of view” (Black 95). This does not mean that children raised by heterosexual parents lack empathy or tolerance, just that children with same-sex parents witness their parents pushing the boundaries of society, possibly resulting in more open-minded attitudes. There is no evidence to show that homosexual parenting has a negative impact on the psychological development of children, meaning that there is no reason to deny homosexual couples their adoption rights.

As these studies show, whether parents are homo- or heterosexual seems to have no effect on children. This means that, despite some belief otherwise, children raised in a household without both a mother and a father face no developmental challenges on account of their family structure. Further studies have shown that family processes are far more important than family structures. This means that whether a child grows up with a mom and a dad or two parents of the same gender is not the determining factor in psychological adjustment. Instead, the stability of the household is what plays a role in a child’s adjustment. “[C]hildren in unhappy, stressful, and conflict-ridden households experience poorer adjustment than children in stable homes” (Goldberg 140). Partners who experience more conflict in their relationship, regardless of sexuality, report children with more behavioral problems than families in which the parents face less conflict (Goldberg 139). Therefore, the strength and stability of relationships inside the household have more effect on children’s adjustment than the genders of their parents do. A child living in a stable household with a mother and father is no more likely to be well adjusted than a child living in a stable household with homosexual parents. In addition, single parents are permitted to adopt, which invalidates the argument that homosexual couples should not adopt because a child needs both a mother and a father. These findings further prove that homosexual

parenting does not hinder the development of children and so homosexual couples should not be restricted from adopting because of their sexuality.

In addition to there being no harmful effects caused by homosexual parenting, expanding the adoption rights of gay couples also has benefits. As previously mentioned, legally recognized parenting provides Social Security benefits for the child as well as allowing the parent to have legal authority. Social Security is not the only way the children benefit, however. Expanding the adoption rights of homosexual couples would also provide many children in foster care across the United States with much-needed homes.

397,122 children in the United States are without permanent families, and, in 2012, only 7,000 of these children were adopted (“Facts and Statistics”). There simply are not enough families to adopt all of these children, and expanding homosexual adoption rights would allow more of these children to find permanent, stable homes. Currently, both Utah and Nebraska have restrictions on fostering by gay and lesbian couples (*Family Equality Council*). Children who are unable to be placed in foster care are sometimes sent to group homes. In 2012, more than 58,000 children in the United States were placed in such homes (“Facts and Statistics”). Children raised in institutions such as orphanages suffer from negative effects on their cognitive development, and on average have IQs 20 points lower than children raised in foster care (“Facts and Statistics”). Why subject children to this when there are couples who are both capable and willing to care for a child? As one 16-year-old who responded to my survey said, “A child in an orphanage is in need of a home. If a homosexual couple can provide a loving and stable home, then they should be allowed to adopt them. Parents that will love and care for you is what is important, not the gender of those parents.” Gay and lesbian couples cannot always have their own biological children, and many, such as two other respondents to my survey who explained

that they were bisexual and wanted nothing more than to adopt one day, would willingly provide homes for these children. There is no reason to deny these children a stable and loving living situation solely based on the prospective parents' sexualities.

As numerous studies have shown, same-sex parenting has no detrimental effects on children, whether in regard to gender, social, or psychological development, and so the sexuality of the parents should not be taken into account when determining custody in adoption cases. In states with gay marriage bans put in place, same-sex couples' adoption rights should be expanded to allow both partners to be legally recognized as parents. It is important for homosexual couples to have the opportunity for both partners to be legally recognized as parents because it not only has benefits for the parents themselves, but also for the children. Even if couples choose to partake in a joint custody agreement, the non-parent does not have the same legal authority that a parent would, and the child would be unable to reap the same benefits, such as Social Security benefits, that they would from a legal parent. Expanding homosexual adoption rights would even allow more children in the foster system to find the permanent homes that they need. The law should not prevent children from receiving the same benefits that any child of a heterosexual couple would or condemn them to a life of instability and uncertainty. If changes are made, couples like John and Alex will be able to raise families, and children like Amelia will have a better chance of finally finding the loving homes that they need.

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